About Us | DONATE | Blog | Mobile App | Contact Us

REGIONS   ISSUES   Reports   Programs   Initiatives   News   Experts   Events   Donate

Civil Society   Democratic Governance   Elections   Freedom of Association   Freedom of Expression

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

- View another year -

Pakistan

Pakistan | **Freedom of the Press 2013** | 2013

Media freedoms remained restricted in 2012 as journalists continued to face a high level of violence and threats from a range of sources, including the military, intelligence services, and militant groups. The constitution and other legislation, such as the Official Secrets Act, authorize the government to curb freedom of speech on subjects including the constitution itself, the armed forces, the judiciary, and religion. Harsh blasphemy laws have occasionally been used to suppress the media. There were some calls to reform the blasphemy laws in early 2011, but several prominent politicians who spoke out in favor of reform were threatened or killed by extremists, which had a major chilling effect on discussion of the issue. Under the 2004 Defamation Act, offenders can face minimum fines of 100,000 rupees ($1,100) and prison sentences of up to five years, but the legislation has not yet been used to convict journalists. The 2008 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Ordinance criminalized cyberterrorism—broadly defined as using or accessing a computer, network, or electronic device for the purposes of frightening, harming, or carrying out an act of violence against any segment of the population or the government—and provided for harsh penalties in cases resulting in a death. Since

2010, broadly defined contempt laws have increasingly been used by the judiciary to curb reporting on particular cases or judges, and a number of print and television outlets were threatened or charged with contempt during 2012. In November, a Lahore court charged chief executive Haji Jan Mohammad of the private television channel ARY with contempt following the broadcast of a program that was critical of the judiciary. The court went on to issue stay orders banning all programming deemed "antijudiciary" or "intended to scandalize" the judiciary.

Accessing official information remains difficult, and existing provisions for access to information are ineffective. In 2011, the government directed public employees to refrain from giving "embarrassing" information to the media. In July 2012, the Senate formed a subcommittee tasked with developing new freedom of information (FOI) legislation alongside the Information Ministry. In December, it was announced that a draft FOI bill would soon be presented to the parliament. If passed, it would replace the 2002 Ordinance on Freedom of Information with the aim of disclosing more information to the public. The provincial government of Punjab also prepared a draft FOI bill, but it faced criticism for its large number of exemptions. Neither bill had been approved at year's end.

After almost a decade, the Press Council of Pakistan (PCP), officially established through a 2002 ordinance and comprising a mix of industry representatives and nominated members from various societal groups, started functioning in late 2011, with the mission of hearing complaints against the media and promoting journalistic ethics. In December 2012, the PCP approved a journalistic code of ethics for coverage of the 2013 general elections. Broadcast media are regulated by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). Officials continued to engage in sporadic efforts to temporarily suspend certain broadcasts or programs under other media regulations, including an official code of conduct, or through the ad hoc banning of broadcast rights or blockage of transmissions around sensitive events. In May 2012, PEMRA issued final notices to television stations deemed to be involved in character assassination through the airing of "derogatory, humiliating programmes" disguised as satire. PEMRA also warned stations not to exceed the limit on foreign broadcasting, set at 10 percent of total airtime in a 24-hour period. The same month, PEMRA issued a media advisory to all broadcasters that banned coverage of 40 organizations. While the vast majority were militant groups, a number of religious groups were also included on the list.

Political actors, government officials, and military and intelligence officers regularly complain about critical coverage, and some have attempted to exert control over media content through unofficial "guidance" to newspaper editors on placement of front-page stories and permissible topics of coverage. Fear of reprisals has caused some journalists to refrain from being overly critical or overstepping unspoken boundaries, particularly concerning military or intelligence operations. Self-censorship also occurs with regard to coverage of sensitive social or religious issues and certain militant groups and political parties. Cable operators occasionally pressure media outlets to censor views that could conflict with their business interests.

Censorship of digital content is a growing concern. While websites and blogs addressing sensitive subjects, particularly Balochi separatism, are routinely blocked, the government moved to block "blasphemous" material as well beginning in 2010. This trend continued in 2012, with attempts to censor websites and mobile-telephone content. On three separate occasions, the government temporarily shut down mobile service in Balochistan, ostensibly in the interest of national security. In February, the government called for proposals for a filtering and blocking system with the ability to block up to 50 million URLs simultaneously. A global network of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) campaigned against the creation of such censorship infrastructure, and as a result, a number of prominent international corporations publicly agreed not to pursue the contract. In March it was reported that the project had been abandoned, and in April Pakistan's High Court ruled that such site blocking must desist as it was in violation of due process and constitutional protections for free expression. Nevertheless, the government briefly blocked the microblogging service Twitter in May due to user messages that were considered "offensive to Islam." In September, the government blocked the video-sharing site YouTube in response to unrest surrounding a controversial anti-Islam film; it remained blocked at year's end. Separately, a cyberattack shut down the website of the *Friday Times* weekly in April, following critical articles on the role of the military and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency in politics. The e-mail accounts of some journalists are reportedly monitored.

The physical safety of journalists remains a key concern. Intimidation by intelligence agencies and the security forces—including physical attacks and arbitrary, incommunicado detention—continues to take place. In 2011, Syed Saleem Shahzad, an investigative reporter and author whose work focused on

Islamist militancy, was abducted, tortured, and killed, allegedly by the ISI; Shahzad had previously received threats from the agency. Amid an outcry following his death, an official commission was established to investigate the murder. In its January 2012 final report, the panel failed to identify those responsible and acknowledged that police did not even question members of the ISI. No arrests were made in the case.

Radical Islamists, mercenaries hired by feudal landlords or local politicians, party activists, security forces, and police have been known to harass journalists and attack media offices. Reporters regularly face physical and verbal intimidation. In response to scathing coverage of an October 2012 attack on teenage education activist Malala Yousafzai by Taliban militants, Taliban leaders called for the targeting of media organizations and journalists across the country. In June, gunmen fired on the offices of the private Urdu-language television outlet Aaj TV, inflicting injuries on security personnel. In November, a bomb was discovered under the car of news anchor Hamid Mir. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), at least seven journalists were murdered in connection with their work in 2012, making Pakistan one of the world's deadliest countries for members of the press. While some of these reporters were deliberately assassinated, others were killed as they attempted to cover unfolding political events or bombings. In January, two Taliban gunmen killed journalist Mukarram Khan Aatif of Voice of America's Pashto-language service at a mosque north of Peshawar in retaliation for his anti-Taliban reporting. In May, the senior editor and head of magazines at Dawn Media Group, Murtaza Razvi, was found strangled to death in a wealthy area of Karachi. In October, journalist Mushtaq Khand of Dharti Television Network was one of six people killed when gunmen opened fire on a political rally. In November, photographer Saqib Khan of the Urdu-language paper *Ummat* was killed in Karachi by a remote-detonated bomb while covering a prior explosion that targeted Shiite Muslims. No arrests were made in any of these cases. Impunity is the norm for such crimes, with many murder cases from previous years remaining unsolved. In November, gunmen killed the last surviving witness set to testify in the case of the 2011 murder of Geo News TV reporter Wali Khan. All six witnesses who agreed to testify have been killed.

Conditions for reporters covering the ongoing conflict in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province remained difficult in 2012, as a number of correspondents were detained, threatened, expelled, kidnapped, or otherwise prevented from working, either by

Taliban militants and local tribal groups or by the army and intelligence services. Journalists' ability to cover military operations in these areas is hampered, as they can gain access only if they agree to become "embedded" with military units, which means that any reporting is subject to potential censorship. Media remain much more tightly restricted in the FATA than elsewhere in Pakistan. Independent radio is allowed only with permission from the FATA secretariat, and no newspapers are published there. In Pakistani-administered Kashmir, publications need special permission from the regional government to operate, and publications that support independence for Kashmir are generally prohibited. Increasing civil conflict in Karachi in the last several years has made reporting in that city more hazardous. In all of these regions, threats to journalists limited the news and information that was available to the general public.

Reporters in the restive Balochistan Province face pressure and harassment from Balochi nationalists, Islamist groups, and the government. In 2012, conditions for journalists in Balochistan remained extremely dangerous, and several were killed or fled into exile after receiving repeated threats. In May, the Baloch Liberation Front (BLF), an armed separatist group, killed journalist Abdul Qadir Hajizai, claiming he was a government informant. The same month, local reporter Razzaq Gul of Express News TV was abducted, tortured, and murdered. In September, Abdul Haq Baloch, the secretary general of the Khuzdar press club and a correspondent for ARY, was also killed in Balochistan, leading to the closure of the press club. He had received prior threats from a progovernment militant group, the Baloch Musalah Diffa Army. In November, reporter Rehmatullah Abid of the Urdu-language television channel Dunya News was shot dead by gunmen on a motorcycle in Panjgur district. Separately, in August, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) correspondent Ayub Tareen fled Balochistan after receiving threats from the BLF for what they deemed partisan reporting. Concerns with safety have led many newspapers in Balochistan to stop publishing editorials or opinion articles.

A wide range of privately owned daily and weekly newspapers and magazines provide diverse and critical coverage of national affairs. Pakistan has 252 daily, 130 weekly, and 279 monthly news publications. The government continues to control Pakistan Television and Radio Pakistan, the only free-to-air broadcast outlets with a national reach; their staff receive directives from the Information Ministry, and their coverage supports official viewpoints. Private radio stations operate in some major cities but are prohibited from carrying news programming,

and PEMRA imposes a maximum broadcast radius of 50 kilometers on private FM transmitters. In rural regions such as the FATA, illegal extremist radio is prominent, with radical Islamists broadcasting unchallenged propaganda. However, in a dramatic opening of the media landscape in recent years, Pakistan now boasts several dozen all-news cable and satellite television channels—some of which broadcast from outside the country—that provide live domestic news coverage, commentary, and call-in talk shows, informing viewers and shaping public opinion on current events. International television and radio broadcasts are usually available, with the exception of news channels based in India. In November 2011, cable operators blocked access to the BBC in response to the airing of a documentary, but the BBC's World News channel was back on the air by March 2012. The internet is not widely used, with about 10 percent of the population accessing the medium in 2012. However, blogs are growing in popularity, and many traditional news outlets provide content over the internet.

Provincial and national authorities have used advertising and other types of boycotts to put economic pressure on media outlets that fail to heed unofficial directives. A ban on official advertisements with the Jang Group, whose Geo television station and various newspapers are known for their increasingly antigovernment editorial line, remained in effect in 2012. Both state and private interests, including the powerful intelligence agencies, reportedly pay for favorable press coverage, a practice that is exacerbated by the low salary levels of many journalists.

2013 SCORES

PRESS STATUS

Not Free

PRESS FREEDOM SCORE

64

LEGAL ENVIRONMENT

19

POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

29

ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT

16

About us

Careers

Contact Us

Privacy Policy

Credits

Subscribe